

Design Review Manual

A GUIDE FOR THE BLACKSTONE RIVER VALLEY





THE BLACKSTONE VALLEY INSTITUTE

The Blackstone Valley Institute was created by the John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor Commission to focus on land use and its effect on the Blackstone Valley's cultural landscape. In cooperation with local governments and the Commission's partner organizations, the Institute engages local leaders, professionals, and volunteers to address issues related to land use management and heritage area planning.

Through its programs, the Institute seeks to provide both a forum to discuss topics of interest and a practical means to find solutions to local issues. Working with a collaborative approach, the Institute provides assistance in three general ways: leadership development, education and training, research and technical information. To learn more about the Institute please visit www.nps.gov/blac/institute.

Design Review Manual

A GUIDE FOR THE BLACKSTONE RIVER VALLEY

A guide to developing an architectural assessment ordinance in
Massachusetts and Rhode Island Blackstone River Valley Communities.

March 2003



A publication of the Blackstone Valley Institute.

Developed by Taintor & Associates, Inc.

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Complementary Development in Your Blackstone Valley Community

A Guide to Design Review

Many communities in the Blackstone Valley are growing at rapid rates and face the challenge of ensuring that new development is compatible with the established character of their historic villages and neighborhoods. Several types of regulations can play a role in shaping the appearance of new structures, uses, and signs, including designation of local historic districts, review of site plans, and implementation of design review. This guide provides Valley communities with general information on how design review works, and how to begin a local design review process. Design guidelines developed through a consensus-building public process and with professional expertise can be an effective tool for shaping community character.

Here is an introductory look at how the various types of aesthetic-related regulations.

MA General Laws
Section 40C sets
forth rules for
Historic Districts

Rhode Island
General Laws
Chapter 45-24.1
addresses
“Historical Area
Zoning”

Local historic districts in Massachusetts and Rhode Island are established pursuant to sections of each state’s general laws that recognize the public’s interest in preserving its archeological, historic, and architecturally significant places. Unlike National Register historic districts that require review only when state or federal funds are being used on a project, local historic districts typically review any externally-visible change within the district’s boundaries, including new construction. A standard set of criteria that has been developed over decades of historic preservation advocacy is the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation. These general principles aim to protect historic resources from impacts to their significance.

Site plan review has become commonplace in local zoning regulations as communities increasingly witness the effect that certain types of projects and uses can have a community. Usually concentrated on commercial, industrial, and multifamily development, site plan review can be compared to residential subdivision review as it seeks to identify and moderate the impact these

projects can have on the community. Site plan review sets standards that typically address the project's public face: elements such as landscaping, lighting, vehicular and pedestrian circulation and access, drainage, noise, view corridors, signage, and site furniture (benches, bollards, bicycle racks, etc.) are subject to an approval process. In most instances, site plan review is conducted by the Planning Board, who may approve or place conditions on a proposal—rejection of an application is usually reserved for incomplete applications, as the vast majority of projects can be modified to comply with site plan standards. Under certain circumstances, site plan review may include consideration of architectural features.

Of the tools used to protect community character, design review is unique in its ability to consider the overall environment with regard to aesthetic quality. Whether a proposed development “fits” into a community's character is a judgment that requires careful consideration, and as a result, review boards are typically composed of professionals who are skilled in design, landscape architecture, business, historic preservation, and urban planning. Using criteria that look to the community's established pattern of architectural features (roof lines, heights, windows, lighting, materials, etc.), building mass, shape, and layout, signage, and landscape details for guidance, review boards can assist property owners in creating attractive projects that are valuable additions to the built environment.

The Regulatory Authority/Structure – What Gives You The Right To Tell Me What My Property Should Look Like?

Just as zoning ordinances were developed under government's “police power,” or the right of government to enact laws to ensure the health and well being of the public, the Supreme Court has upheld the notion that it is within the authority of government to protect and promote the aesthetic character of communities. Still, the area of design review can be hotly debated due to its reliance on subjective opinion, and has received different levels of authority from Massachusetts and Rhode Island. In every instance, design review procedures should strive to be as clear and consistent as possible, in order to ensure that everyone is treated fairly.

"The concept of the public welfare is broad and inclusive, the values it represents are spiritual as well as physical, aesthetic as well as monetary. It is within the power of the legislature to determine that the community shall be beautiful as well as healthy, spacious as well as clean, well balanced as well as carefully patrolled."

An Excerpt from an Opinion written by Justice William O. Douglas, United States Supreme Court, 1954

Berman vs. Parker, US 26-75 Supreme Court 98, Ed.27 (1954)

In Massachusetts, since design review is not specifically referenced in the state's enabling legislation, communities have used it as a piece of a special permit or incentive-based approval process. Design review boards are typically formed as advisory groups to Planning and Zoning Boards. Although these decisions are termed as "non-binding," design review recommendations are seriously considered by these boards as they deliberate over "binding" decisions (site plan review, special permits, variances, sub-division approvals, etc.), and can be as potent as any zoning requirement. However, design review typically applies to projects that require some type of "special" approval, and is therefore dependent upon the zoning bylaw or ordinance to identify uses and conditions that are not "as of right" for its power. In many communities, new commercial, industrial, and multifamily projects do undergo some type of Planning or Zoning Board review, therefore design review can easily enhance the approval process; as discussed further herein, Blackstone Valley communities will first need to look to their zoning ordinances to see what types of projects are already targeted for special attention.

Rhode Island's enabling legislation, Title 45, Section 24 entitled "Zoning Ordinances," cites the idea of "promoting a high quality of design in the development the of private and public facilities," among its purposes, and defines a process of Development Plan Review, "whereby local officials review site plans, maps, and other documentation of a development to determine the compliance with the stated purposes and standards of the ordinance." Further, per this act, development plan review may be applied to "by right" uses, provided that "the review is only based on specific and objective guidelines."

As a result, Rhode Island communities may provide for a direct, binding approach to design review, without necessarily restricting it as purely advisory. Design review approval is required prior to building permit issuance, and decisions may be appealed to the Zoning Board or to state court, depending what individual ordinances specify. In both Cumberland and Providence, the Zoning Board may hear appeals, but cannot overturn a design review decision without finding that it was reached in error, or capriciously, or is completely unsubstantiated.

Design review procedures in both states generally call for staff review and recommendation prior to consideration by the Board or Committee. Plan submittal requirements seek to allow the reviewer a full understanding of the proposed development, and may require fee payment to cover costs (staff time, consulting, etc.) associated with the review.

Blackstone Valley Institute Communities and Design Review

None of the Massachusetts Corridor communities have instituted a design review process that exists independent from historical preservation regulations. About one-quarter of the MA towns have site plan review regulations in place (Blackstone, Millbury, Sutton), and two have local historic districts (Grafton, Worcester). Grafton has produced a guide to general design criteria, which hasn't been incorporated into the town's regulatory framework; likewise,



Millbury has developed Downtown Design Guidelines that the Millbury Improvement Initiative uses to inform property owners who are planning changes to their buildings, but the Town has not yet adopted these in any formal way.

Of the Rhode Island Corridor members, Cumberland, Woonsocket and Providence have implemented design review. Other towns and cities, such as East Providence and Lincoln, have some experience with design review via their development plan review procedures, which take visual appearance into consideration. Cumberland reviews the design of its commercial and industrial developments, as well as multifamily projects of more than six units. Described further herein, Cumberland enacted its regulation in 1996 and amended it in 1999 to reflect its current form. Most towns have enacted site plan, or development plan review regulations for large projects, and about 50% have local historic districts (Cumberland, Gloucester, North Smithfield, Pawtucket, and Providence).

Grafton's Design Guidelines Manual sets forth clear, general guidelines for site development throughout the town, as well as a few specific suggestions for historic mill village sites. Focused on landscaping, pedestrian and vehicle circulation, and the contributions of shop fronts to the streetscape, this manual is illustrated by photos and drawings, and is intended to provide guidance to owners as they make changes to their properties. The guide is advisory, and "is meant to complement other guidelines, local regulations, and your own ideas." Millbury's Downtown Guidelines provide detailed instructions for the treatment of windows, doors, awnings, signs, lighting, color, etc., and are tailored to historic preservation considerations.

The Cumberland ordinance, according to the town's planning director, has met with reasonable success and its full text is appended here for reference. Its key elements feature:

- Mandatory design review approval for all new commercial, industrial, and multifamily projects (6+ units) prior to building permit issuance;

- A five-member, staggered term commission, composed of appointees of the Mayor (2), Town Council (1), the Planning Board (1), and the Historical Commission (1), plus the Planning Director serving in an *ex officio* capacity;
- Required submittal of preliminary and final design review applications;
- A 10 day staff review period for each application;
- Fees based on the estimated value of work;
- An appeal procedure to the Zoning Board of Review; and
- An annual review of design standards by an advisory committee comprised of one Design Review Commission member, the four district fire chiefs, a historic district commission representative, a Cumberland Business Association member, a representative from the Economic Development commission, and a representative from the John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor Commission.

Woonsocket has added a Design Review Overlay District to its Zoning Ordinance, that applies to all non-residential structures in its commercial and mixed-use districts (C-1, C-2, MU-1, MU-2). New construction and substantial renovations are reviewed by a commission made up of members of the Planning Board, and plans are approved with respect to nine criteria: architectural design, landscape design, impacts on available utilities and the planning of future improvements, off-site traffic impacts, on-site traffic circulation, overall visual quality, relationship to surrounding buildings and sites, sign design and placement, and site layout.

Providence's DownCity Design Review Committee (DRC) is authorized under Section 502 of its Zoning Ordinance pertaining to its "DownCity" overlay district. In contrast to Cumberland, this commission's authority extends only to this overlay district, but applies to all exterior improvements (including open spaces), regardless of type or scale. It features:

The DownCity Design Review Committee's complete regulation can be viewed in the Appendix.

- Emphasis on historic preservation, the Comprehensive Plan, and "encourages day and nighttime activities that relate to the pedestrian and promote the arts, entertainment and housing."
- Authority to grant density and height bonuses, or transfers of development rights;

- Five members, one representative of the historic district commission and four mayoral appointees (1 registered Rhode Island architect or landscape architect, 1 district property owner, 1 developer, real estate agent or builder, and 1 resident).

The introduction of new regulations often requires a significant time investment by staff, board members, and other volunteers. In some cases, the primary obstacle to adopting design review is lack of staff time in light of competing demands. This is especially true for smaller towns, where smaller budgets and staffs are challenged to serve all aspects of public need. With this in mind, this guide highlights how design review can work in Blackstone Valley communities, and illustrates a step-by-step approach to launching this community preservation tool.

Design Review 101 — Five Steps to Developing A Local Regulation

THE PROCESS

1. *Where to begin? Form a committee!*

The first step in introducing design review into your community should be to establish a working group, or committee, to perform and oversee this process. The local Planning Board can establish such a group, which could be made of the same people who will eventually serve on the board, but might consider drawing from a larger set of people, some with design experience and others who will be directly affected by the design review regulation (i.e. business owners). All members should be prepared to dedicate a good amount of time to spend in regular meetings until their work has been adopted by the community.

2. *Ordinance Mechanics:*

*Who should be on the Board,
What should be reviewed,
When should the Committee meet and make decisions,
How are decisions made, and
Why is this Important?*

One of the first steps the working group should make is to become familiar with the mechanics of design review, and to begin thinking about the choices they will need to make as they move forward with adopting a local regulation. Below is a description of the essential elements of design review, and some examples of how other communities have chosen to implement each.

Regulatory Authority

Depending on the goals your community hopes to achieve and the statutory authority the community has under the state's enabling act, the first critical decision to be made in building a design review process is to determine how it fits into the overall procedure for obtaining a building permit. As mentioned above, in

Massachusetts, design review recommendations are typically advisory to other boards or commissions.

Rhode Island communities have implemented design review both as advisory to the special permit process, and as a separate approval needed prior to receiving a building permit.

Issues:

- **Should design review be advisory or a mandatory approval?**
- **Should design review be a separate ordinance with its own, complete set of rules or part of another permitting process?**
- **How will design review interact with other approvals?**

If design review is advisory in nature, then procedural requirements such as enforcement, appeal, etc. are addressed by other approvals, and need not be a part of the design review rules.

If your community chooses to create a stand-alone design review ordinance, you should take care to make sure that it contains all the necessary administrative elements to ensure a fair process for applicants, including definitions, enforcement procedures, an appeal process, etc. The ordinance should relate to other approval processes, as building permit applicants should be able to follow a logical permitting process without being “bounced back and forth” between a variety of boards, commissions, and committees. Sometimes a map, or flow chart of “how to obtain a building permit” can help flag potential problems.

Committee Composition

Many design review committees are set up with five members, and two alternates.

Board Member Qualifications:

- ☐ Architect or landscape architect?
- ☐ Historic preservation professional?
- ☐ Construction professional?
- ☐ Business owner/manager?
- ☐ Urban planner?
- ☐ Planning Board member?
- ☐ Zoning Board member?
- ☐ Historic Commission member?
- ☐ Town Council member?

This size allows for a three-person majority vote. Members should have some experience in design, landscape architecture, historic preservation, construction, business, or urban planning, and terms should be staggered to ensure that the board retains continuity.

Since the design review board will yield power over high profile developments and will need to interact with other Boards, Commissions, and staff, it is necessary to think about how members are chosen to serve. In reviewing several ordinances, board members are generally appointed by a variety of town officials, and may

Appointments are made by:

- ☐ The Mayor?
- ☐ Town/City Council?
- ☐ Historical Commission?
- ☐ Planning Board?
- ☐ Zoning Board?

be representatives from other regulatory bodies.

Applicability

Design review should be applied to areas that deserve special attention due to historical, architectural, or cultural importance in the community. In addition, all new

Issues:

- What are the goals of the design review process?
- Where should design review apply?
- What types of uses and/or structures should be reviewed?
- Should certain projects be exempt from review?
- Who determines if a project requires design review?

commercial, institutional, multi-family, industrial buildings, major renovations, and signage usually are covered by design review. Whether to subject small scale residential projects to design review should be considered in the context of the overall goals of the ordinance. Following are some examples from Massachusetts communities outside of the Blackstone Valley.

Brookline, MA has successfully administered a design review process for over 30 years. It combines the approaches outlined above, and reviews all “new structures and outdoor uses, exterior alterations, exterior additions, and exterior changes” within certain areas (along major transportation routes) as well as projects of particular types (non-residential over 10,000 s.f., gas stations, multifamily, etc.).

Area Covered:

- ☐ Commercial zoning districts?
- ☐ Historic districts?
- ☐ Industrial and institutional districts?

Franklin, MA likewise targets its design review to uses within its commercial zoning districts, as well as to uses (commercial, industrial, institutional, multifamily, signs) regardless of the district.

Uses Covered:

- ☐ Commercial
- ☐ Commercial over ____ s.f.?
- ☐ Industrial?
- ☐ Institutional?
- ☐ Municipal use?
- ☐ Multifamily?
- ☐ Single and Two Family Residential?
- ☐ Any outdoor use?
- ☐ Signage?

Wellesley, MA ties design review to permit requests for signage and site plan review. It specifically exempts single and two family structures from review, but otherwise requires approval of all new construction, façade renovation, and signage. It highlights eleven distinct areas of town, and describes the individual contribution each makes to the town’s character.

Type of Change Covered:

- ☐ All new construction?
- ☐ All exterior changes? (including demolition?)
- ☐ Only changes over ____ s.f.?
- ☐ Projects requiring special permits?
- ☐ Projects requesting variances?

Exemptions:

- ☐ For small projects (under ____ s.f.)?
- ☐ Upon request?
- ☐ Single and two family residential?
- ☐ Municipal?

Dedham, MA's design review board looks at all exterior construction and signage in its business districts, as well as those requiring special or site plan permits in six other zones.

Most design review boards also outline a "downsized" process for smaller projects, allowing for staff approval without board consideration. Many also allow specific exemptions, or allow an applicant to request an exemption based upon individual circumstances. Usually the town planner or zoning enforcement officer refers applicants to the design review board.

Submittal Requirements

Design review boards must be able to clearly envision the proposed project in its surrounding context in order to be able to make its recommendations. Plans, elevations, photos, and narrative descriptions are essential.

Issues:

- What materials will the Committee need in order to make a decision?
- Should there be a submittal fee?

Typical submittal requirements request:

- Written descriptions of the proposed change and of materials exposed to view
- Color photographs of the area, existing adjacent buildings
- Scaled elevation drawings
- Landscaping and grading plans showing all improvements
- A plan showing outdoor lighting and signage

Required illustrations include:

- Existing and proposed lot boundary lines, dimensions, and areas
- Existing and proposed structures

- Existing and proposed driveways, parking areas, handicapped ramps, and site improvements
- Parking layout, with all spaces, dimensions, type and number

Detailed, complete plans are essential to the review process.

- Zoning lines
- Existing and proposed landscaped areas, including types of trees, shrubs, and other plantings
- Details of major architectural features and signage (including color and materials)
- Building and feature dimensions
- Roof top mechanical equipment

As discussed in the following section, boards that perform preliminary reviews can save an applicant time and money spent in revising and reproducing plans upon final submittal.

Design review regulations usually call for a fee to be submitted as part of the application, not unlike other approval processes. Fees should be roughly comparable to the direct costs incurred as a result of the review, accounting for staff time, advertising, and/or consultant advice.

Design Review fees range from \$0 to \$300+ in communities featured here.

Cumberland uses a sliding scale for fees, based on a project's value starting at \$50.00 and ranging up to \$250+ for proposals worth more than \$5 million; Providence's fees are set according to the type of application (i.e. 1994: \$30.00 for minor alterations, \$120.00 for new construction), and Brookline, MA charges fees ranging from \$75.00 to \$300.00 depending on the type and scale of the proposed work. Wellesley charges flat fees: \$150 for minor projects, and \$300 for major construction and special permit antenna projects. Franklin, MA doesn't charge a fee.

Schedule and Review Procedures

Timeliness and fairness are key factors to pay attention to when developing the schedule and procedures for a design review process. Closely linked is the capacity of paid staff or consultants to review applications for completeness and make recommendations on content prior to Board meetings. Setting reasonable expectations and easy-to-administer procedures will play an important role in designing a successful review process in Blackstone Valley communities.

Issues:

- **How often will the Board meet?**
- **How many times will the Board review the proposed project? How many days should this take?**
- **Should a public hearing be part of the process?**
- **What will the role of the City/Town Planner be?**
- **What constitutes a vote of the Board?**

In order to assist applicants in their understanding of the design review guidelines, help them to design an approvable project, and to save them the trouble of submitting a proposal that likely will not win approval, most procedures encourage a preliminary, informal meeting with either staff or the board prior to a formal submittal. At this time, the lines of communication are opened, issues and opportunities are identified, and a mutual understanding of the future process can be reached.

A sample application adapted from Wellesley, MA can be viewed in the Appendix.

Development of an easy to use, straightforward application can help applicants and officials alike. A checklist of requirements can be used to remind applicants of what the process will entail, and allow staff to check applications for completeness and schedule hearings.

Boards are likely to meet at least once a month, or as frequently as is required to not unduly delay proposed projects. Many ordinances allow design review applications and other approvals to proceed simultaneously, however, those advisory reviews, obviously, need to be completed prior to consideration of the approval to which they are making a recommendation.

Once a complete, formal application is submitted, the design review board should be able to make its recommendation within a time frame of 30-90 days. In many instances, even with advisory opinions, meetings are open and advertised, with notice mailed to abutting property owners. In order to lessen the administrative burden on limited staff, applicants may be asked to prepare and mail advertisements and/or notices.

Decision Types

Because the goals of design review can generally be achieved by paying attention to suggested guidelines, decisions rarely involve “rejecting” an application; rather, projects are either approved, or approved “with conditions.” Through on-going discussion with applicants, proposed projects are shaped to meet design guidelines

Issues:

- **What do non-binding decisions look like?**
- **What does a binding decision say?**
- **How can the Board make changes to a proposal?**

The Town of Dedham, MA has carefully worded its standard, advisory written responses:

- The project substantially reflects the intent of the guidelines and this determination by the board will be forwarded to the appropriate town boards and/or departments as noted below.
- The project reflects in part the intent of the guidelines, however, there are recommendations for revision described below. Please review our comments and contact us with any questions. We hope you will consider implementing the changes suggested. If you do, please resubmit the revised project information and the Design Review Board will make a prompt review and report.
- The project does not reflect the general intent of the guidelines. Please review our comments and contact us with any questions. We hope you will make changes in response to the concerns raised. If you do, please resubmit the revised project information and the Design Review Board will make a prompt review and report.
- The project has received preliminary review and comments are included to assist you as you complete your proposal. Please contact us if we can be of any additional help as you complete the final design of your project. We look forward to reviewing your final project plans.

Appeal

Advisory design review processes are not required to provide avenues for appeal, since their decisions are non-binding, and factor into other approvals that do offer appeal opportunities to rejected applicants. Boards and commissions who receive design review recommendations are expected to incorporate that advice into their

Issues:

- **To whom and by whom can a decision be appealed?**
- **On what grounds can a decision be overturned?**

deliberations, and some bylaws and ordinances require written decisions to justify any substantial departure from design review decisions.

Most mandatory design review processes allow rejected applicants to appeal decisions to a local group, prior to filing their objection in a court. Usually this venue is provided by the Zoning Board, though criteria for reversing a design review recommendation can be restricted to the Board's finding that the recommendations were arbitrary and capricious. Processes that are advisory typically follow standard appeal procedures for special permit issuance.

Procedure to Review and Amend Guidelines

Finally, the Design Review Committee should follow a clear, logical procedure to amend its guidelines. Cumberland has a formal, annual, committee-driven process, while others decide simply to treat design guidelines as other regulations, to be "amended from time to time," by simple majority vote of the committee.

THE MECHANICS

3. *Establish Design Criteria*

Perhaps the most time-consuming task involved in developing a design review ordinance is creating criteria and guidelines by which the Board can evaluate, in a fair and efficient manner, projects that come before their consideration.

Every community has its own unique character, and should decide for itself what design elements it wants to protect and/or promote.

While looking at how other communities have tackled the task of creating design criteria may help to get started, design criteria do vary from place to place, corresponding to the local built environment.

Guidelines should be developed with the input of a design professional, and to the greatest possible extent, should be accompanied by images/pictures/examples. By reading the guidelines, an applicant should be able to sense whether his or her project will meet with the Board's approval, even though the decision-making process can never be completely objective. To this end, guidelines should be:

- stated simply,
- user-friendly,
- tailored to building types (i.e. commercial vs. residential, etc.),

- compatible with other regulations (i.e. they should not demand buildings that are not possible under building code, zoning regulations, etc.), and
- flexible.

Getting the public involved as guidelines are developed will help the design review board gain wide acceptance, and result in an effective measure to preserve community character.

Create a list of general criteria that design review should seek to achieve. In reviewing several design review ordinances, goals tend to echo similar categories of desired outcomes:

1. Context/Compatibility – the Building Should Relate Well to its Surrounding Environment

An oft-repeated criteria statements maintains that

“Proposed development shall be related harmoniously to the terrain and to the use, scale, and architecture of existing buildings in the vicinity that have a functional or visual relationship to the proposed building(s).”

This goal stresses that proposed development closely look to existing architectural patterns (building layout & spacing, height, scale, form, public areas, etc.) and seek to enhance the overall area. Images that portray “do’s and don’ts” of this goal might show a building whose height, front setback, and entryway repeat an established pattern vs. one that obviously does not “fit.”

2. Preservation and Enhancement of the Landscape

Many design review guidelines aim to, whenever possible, keep landscapes true to their “natural state, minimizing grading, and soil and tree removal.” In addition, design review can also stress the provision of attractive, hardy landscaping for parking lot interiors and buffers, while minimizing the amount of paving to the extent feasible.

3. Provide Open Space



A pocket park softens the appearance of this corner parking lot while providing a pleasant sitting area.

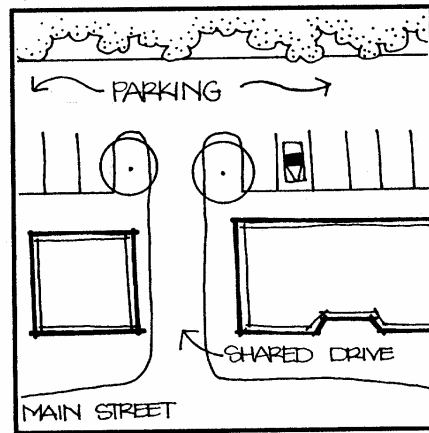
Several design review boards look to proposed development to provide open space, and prefer that it:

“...shall be designed to be visually and physically accessible to the extent feasible. Open space shall add to the visual amenities of the vicinity by maximizing its visibility for persons passing or overlooking the site from

neighboring properties. If open space is intended for active use, it shall be designed as to maximize its accessibility for all individuals, including the disabled, encourage social interaction and facilitate ease of maintenance.”

4. Provide Efficient and Effective Circulation

The layout of parking lots, spaces, and circulation paths (sidewalks, travel aisles, etc) can have a significant effect on the overall impression the proposed development will



Review of circulation layout is an important.

have on its environment. For this reason, design review boards typically pay close attention to the details of how cars and people will move through the site, as well as how they relate to the buildings, landscaping, and the public street.

For example, pedestrians should be able to safely walk from the public sidewalk to the building’s entry without being forced to cross hazardous areas, such as loading docks or short term, busy parking areas. Several communities have adopted the following language to describe this goal:

“With respect to vehicular and pedestrian circulation, special attention shall be given to the location and number of access points to public streets and sidewalks, to the separation of vehicles and pedestrians, to the arrangement of parking areas and to service and loading areas, and to the location of accessible routes and ramps for the disabled.”

5. Signs and Advertising – Make Understandable, and Do Not Detract from the Surrounding Properties

Detailed sign regulations are often included in a community’s zoning ordinance or bylaw, and design review boards are not charged with the responsibility to oversee compliance with rules other than their own. With this in mind, design review addresses signs with relatively simple criteria: is the size appropriate to its surroundings,



Illumination of a sign should be provided from an external, stationary source, directed primarily onto the sign.

Signs should respect an existing sign line and should not conceal architectural features.

is its placement with respect to the architectural features appropriate, and do the materials, lettering and color make the sign readable and attractive?

6. Special Features – Integrate with Overall Design



Integrate site features with overall design.

This criterion refers to elements such as trash dumpsters, utilities, loading docks, storage areas, mailboxes, etc., and asks that they be treated such that they fit into the overall development. The use of setbacks, screens, plantings, and fencing are typical ways to make these features “disappear” into the overall site.

In addition, streetscape elements, such as trash barrels and benches, should be reviewed with attention paid to their style, placement, and functionality.

7. Protect the Community’s Heritage

Although they are distinct from historical commissions, design review boards generally support the objective of preserving the historic fabric of the community. To fulfill this desire, proposed designs should “minimize the removal or disruption of historic, traditional, or significant uses, structures, or architectural features or neighborhood patterns, and the covering of character-defining building elements (columns, arches, lintels, fenestration, etc.) is discouraged. New structures, additions and alterations shall be sympathetic to complement the scale and design of surrounding historic structures and locally significant buildings of architectural merit.”



This newer structure is in harmony with its historic neighbors due to its symmetry and sense of proportion.

In order to responsibly carry out this goal, design review commissions may invite comments from

local historical commissions.

8. Make Spaces Safe and Secure

Design review may take into consideration the way the proposed development treats emergency access, outdoor waiting areas and gathering spots, and the space between it and adjacent structures in order to ensure that public safety is advanced.

The location and type of lighting can be critical to safety, as well as the degree of visibility of public spaces.

9. Consider the “Microclimate” – Noise, Vapors, Fumes, Heat, Light, etc.

Like signage, many zoning ordinances set rules to guard against nuisances. Loud or uninterrupted noise, as well as vibration and errant light, are typically prohibited. Design review can, however, pay attention to how buildings relate to each other and to their surroundings, regardless of their individual compliance with zoning. For example, air conditioning units can be reviewed to see that their location is sensitive to adjacent users, and restaurant uses should carefully consider the location of kitchen vents, grease disposal, recycling containers and garbage dumpsters.

10. Provide for Nature’s Events – Rain, Snow, Ice, etc.

Design review boards may choose to examine how a proposed development will function with regard to natural occurrences. On steeply pitched roofs in New England, snow guards are essential to protect passersby from fast-falling snow packs, and parking areas should not direct surface runoff to adjacent sidewalks, streets, or properties. For these types of cases, boards can play a role helping property owners think through appropriate methods of dealing with “Mother Nature.”

4. Develop Community Based Guidelines

A new design review board can be greatly assisted by the creation of specific guidelines that illustrate the goals they have set forward for the design review process. The more objective the decision-making process is, the more likely it is that design review will gain strength and acceptance as a community preservation technique; by contrast, if the board makes decisions on individual likes and dislikes, and appears to be inconsistent in its opinions, then the process will quickly lose its credibility.

One option is to hire a consultant to assist in identifying and describing the community’s architectural heritage. The cost will vary according to the area that needs to be covered, and by the firm’s set rates, but there are several grant programs that may help pay for this type of work. In Massachusetts, communities can consult the Department of Housing and Community Development – Division of Municipal Development for assistance, while the Statewide Planning Office can be a resource for Rhode Island cities and towns. Even if a consultant is hired to do the majority of field work, a design guidelines committee should be established to direct and evaluate their work.

Another option is, working with available town staff if possible, to have the Committee work to develop guidelines as part of a volunteer effort. Ideally headed by a design

professional, a group of volunteers can be trained to survey and record details about the community's existing architecture.

Whether or not a consultant is used, the development of guidelines will follow a common structure: an assessment of visual character is prepared and translated into a series of desired outcomes and unacceptable conditions. One great way to begin developing local guidelines is to take photos of buildings in town that are well liked as well as those that are considered unappealing in order to begin defining the characteristics the guidelines will serve to promote. These photos will serve as tangible examples that the design review commission and potential developers can use to shape future change in the built environment.

The JHC Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor has developed design guidelines focused on best practices in historic preservation.

In 1989, the JHC Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor developed, with the assistance of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (SPNEA), an extensive, 200-page manual aimed at preserving the historic architectural resources of the Valley. It contains a description of major architectural styles, preservation guidelines, information on materials conservation, and some design guidelines for creation of new structures, sites, and public improvements to ensure their compatibility with historic fabric. An excerpt from this report is appended here for reference.

Below is a list of topics that have been included in a number of design review regulations, and how they have been interpreted to apply to a variety of communities:

Architecture

1. Building Height, Shape, Massing, and Layout

Arguably the most important aspect of reviewing new buildings or additions is to look at how their overall shape, placement and mass will fit in with its surrounding



These historic commercial structures have shared heights and complementary cornice lines, resulting in an inviting streetscape

environment. In surveying a group of buildings to develop common guidelines, some things to consider are:

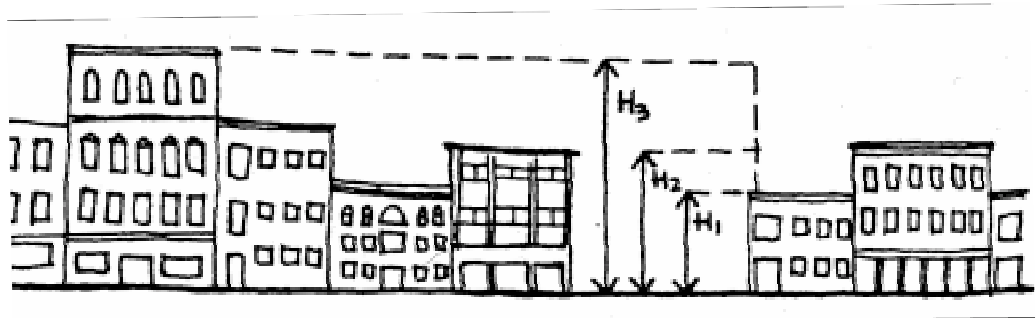
Ranges of actual building heights (and what current zoning will allow): historic properties tend to have taller floor to ceiling heights, and can average 12 feet/floor for a commercial structure. Compatible heights should maintain cornice lines, and, if taller than adjacent structures, "step back" the added height to lessen its impact.

Providence's DownCity District calls for:

- “Buildings shall be at least three (3) stories in height...”
- “Buildings over six (6) stories shall have a recess line of at least ten (10) feet.”

The JHCBRVNHC guidelines for infill development, based upon Lowell's Preservation Plan, set 3 types of allowable heights based upon prevailing heights within a building block:

- H1 = minimum height – no less than the lower of the adjacent buildings, or two stories, whichever is greater”
- “H2 = maximum height generally allowed – equal to the taller of the immediately adjacent buildings but no less than two stories”
- “H3 = maximum height based upon the merits of design...up to the highest existing building on the block, subject to design review.”



From the JHCBRVNHCC Design Guidelines, p 112

Franklin, MA suggests that:

“The height of any proposed alteration should be compatible with the style and character of the surrounding buildings, within zoning requirements.”

2. Shape and Massing

Guidelines should set forth criteria for the shape and mass of a building, as these tend to be important elements of whether a proposed development “fits” into its surroundings. Typical illustrations used to exemplify a desirable outcome will show how a building should meet the front setback of its neighbors, repeat the rhythm of doors, openings, and offsets to create an interesting street front, and break up “monotonous” walls with architectural treatments such as changes in material, niches, bays, columns, cornices, etc.

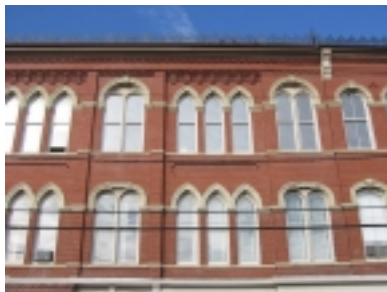
Wickford Proposed Guidelines, for the town village, generally require that:

- “The scale of the building should be compatible with its architectural design style and character of the surroundings.”
- “The scale of ground level design elements such as building entryways, windows, porches, plazas, parks, pedestrian furniture, signs, plantings, and other street and site elements should be direct towards the use and enjoyment of pedestrians.”

Dedham, MA recommends that urban commercial structures “respect the height of surrounding building cornices, stories, windows, etc. Subdivide facades into smaller parts to identify street level uses, individual tenants, and upper level businesses or residential uses.”

3. Building elements: windows, doors, roofs, and materials

Many design guidelines establish specific principles for building elements by surveying existing examples and describing their characteristics.



These Victorian window openings are of varying shapes, but together create a pattern that characterizes this façade.

Window standards might refer to symmetrical appearance, proportionate to the building’s overall size, and require that upper story windows are placed in line with first floor openings. Consistency of size, shape, rhythm, and style may be desired, as well as avoidance of monotonous, uninterrupted curtain wall type openings.

Doors should respect the pattern of the street, and main entrances in village districts may be required to enter onto the main street.

Roof style guidelines generally look to adjacent properties to set an appropriate example. In Wickford, consideration is being given to prohibiting flat roofs on single story structures, in order to preserve the predominant style of the village. Flat roofs may be appropriate for buildings over two stories, “provided that all visibly exposed walls have an articulated cornice that project horizontally from the vertical building plane.”

Design guidelines that seek to use building materials as a criterion may establish preferred building materials based upon the area’s characteristics (i.e. wood, brick, and stone), and can discourage use of vinyl or aluminum siding. Burlington, VT, for example, promotes the use of slate for new roofs, for its appearance, compatibility, and long-term economy. Given that the science of building construction can change significantly over time, design review should allow for compatible materials to be used, if they can demonstrate their appearance will be maintained over time

4. Compatibility & Streetscape Impression

Since many design review processes seek to preserve architectural character in downtowns and villages, emphasis on the elements that make up an inviting streetscape is important. Blank walls, tinted or opaque windows, and use of aluminum storefront construction may be discouraged or prohibited, in order to avoid reflective glare and advance an active pedestrian environment. Guidelines at the street level in commercial areas can be quite specific in an effort to foster a critical mass of activity in downtown areas, and to avoid negative impacts that can result from a poorly designed project located on a key site.



This storefront achieves over 90% transparency, inviting people to peer inside.

Providence has a rule regarding the “transparency” of the street level of new buildings in the DownCity district: “all new construction shall provide areas of transparency equal to 70% of the wall area, between the height of two (2) and eight (8) feet from the ground, of each exterior wall.” Wickford’s proposed design guidelines request 60% transparency for street walls in the zone between 2 and 9 feet.

Similarly, Evanston, IL sets this standard for its village buildings:

“At a minimum, approximately 50% of the walls of ground floor spaces directly facing streets shall have large transparent window and door openings, placed at the eye level of pedestrians. To allow people to see interesting things inside buildings, fixed interior walls shall not obscure views into the building.”



This storefront uses awnings, window boxes, and large display windows to attract passersby.

Complementary guidelines may suggest that no street wall extend for more than 35-50 feet without window or door openings, and some type of architectural relief.

Encouraged building elements may include awnings, canopies, bay windows, plazas, balconies, decorative detail, public seating, and well-designed lighting.

SITE PLAN CONSIDERATIONS

Quite frequently, design review ordinances contain site plan guidelines in addition to those that focus on architectural features. Guidelines for site plan review tend to be

simpler to create, since in most instances, they do not look to adjacent sites in order to develop benchmarks for acceptable site development. In other words, they are less relative, and more absolute, in their design. As discussed above, the use of site plan review is more widespread than that of design review, perhaps due in part to the comparatively straightforward nature of the guidelines.

1. Landscaping & Paving

Site plan guidelines can specify the amount and type of landscaping and paving throughout the proposed development. Trees, flowering plants, evergreens, and open



These low-lying shrubs create an effective screen for this bicycle rack, making it a natural part of the site's landscape.

grass areas should be designed to enhance the site and its building(s), relieve the expanse of paving in parking areas, screen uses from view, and contribute to the site's microclimate (contributing to the site's shading, wind-breaking, air quality, and drainage functions).

Thought is often given to ensuring that the site will have a four-season landscape, and the variety of plantings selected should pay attention to blooming cycles. Trees may be required to line street frontage

at spacing of 50' on center (or clustered, depending on the site), and are best planted after having reached a minimum caliper of 3 inches, placed in a adequately sized planting bed, and not directly under overhead wires. Low height shrubs and flowers can enhance vehicular entrances and exits without blocking site lines, and are good choice for plantings nearer to building walls.

Ideally, site plan review would be conducted in close conjunction with design review. In an attempt to gain an adequate amount of landscaping, some ordinances require



Landscaping can considerably improve the appearance of parked vehicles.

planting beds of certain sizes, occupied with trees, shrubs, and flowers, to run the entire length of all building facades visible from public ways. Review of the proposed building's design can enable this type of accent be effectively evaluated.

From a site plan perspective, the amount of paving should be limited to the minimum required by access and parking. Typical site plan guidelines call for the landscaping of all

parking areas, with planting beds and strips lining the outer boundary of the lot as well as being interspersed throughout. The desired amount of landscape d area may be expressed as a ratio to paved area (50 s.f./parking space), or require a minimum percentage of green space (i.e. 5% of the parking area). Perimeter landscaped buffers of specified widths may also be desired to separate uses.

2. Vehicular and pedestrian circulation

Site plans should reveal safe, coordinated ways for pedestrians and vehicles to move through the site. Access from parking areas to the building, as well as to and from the site to the street should be carefully examined for potential conflicts. Curb cuts may be limited to minimum safe widths to better direct and control vehicular routes, and located to maximize sight lines for entering and exiting traffic.

3. Drainage

While drainage issues may be better controlled under storm water management guidelines, site plan review offers an opportunity to check that proposed developments do not increase site runoff, and employ best practices in designing recharge methods and erosion and pollution control.

4. Infrastructure Adequacy

Proposed development should be reviewed to ascertain that adequate public infrastructure is in place to service the new use. Regulations may seek the development's contribution towards necessary upgrades to meet its future needs.

5. HVAC units, Trash dumpster, Outdoor Storage, etc.



This image features both screened and unscreened utility units.

Attention should be paid to the appearance, noise, and odor related to these building accessories. Guidelines typically call for screening these uses and locating them away from where they may impact adjacent uses.

6. Site Lighting

As with paving, guidelines for site lighting stress the need for safety, but often follow the motto of “less is more,” once safety is adequately addressed. Casting light onto nearby properties is typically prohibited, and as a result, “cut off” fixtures are recommended, especially when lights are atop taller posts to maximize coverage. Pedestrian-scaled fixtures may be allowed to cast light in other than a strict downward fashion, with the understanding that their coverage will not extend to adjacent land.

5. *Implementing Design Review: Process, Capacity, and Timeframe*

As with many civic initiatives, accomplishing the task of creating and implementing a community-based design review process is largely dependent upon the dedication and commitment of volunteers. This team will be responsible to work with local government officials and the

public to make design review a reality.

Successful design review procedures have been developed with a fundamental understanding of how this type of regulation fits into the community's culture, and governing structure. The Committee should carefully consider how the eventual ordinance/process will work with current regulatory procedures and administration. Creating a flow chart of the approval process for a building permit can help in imagining how design review will fit into established procedures.

Developing the ordinance itself involves two steps: adopting language that sets forth procedures, and creating guidelines by which design review will be implemented. The following materials contain several examples of both, and serve as a good starting point for developing a new regulation. Amesbury, MA, for example, looked to the Town of Holyoke, and chose to reprint its illustrated "Downtown Design Guidebook" to help describe its design criteria.

As referenced above, however, each community should spend time assessing its particular architectural heritage, and build local guidelines to preserve its character and promote complementary development. This can prove to be the most time-consuming aspect of launching design review.

Examples from Other Communities

Looking at how other communities have implemented design review can be an extremely valuable first step towards developing a new process. Attached are several examples of how design review has worked in places, in and outside of the Blackstone Valley; collectively, they provide a good introduction to the variety of ways design review has been implemented, and the variety of guidelines that have been developed to support the process.

In addition, model ordinances, bylaws, and a sample application are provided to serve as potential templates for the preparation of a new design review process.

In the Blackstone River Valley

- Cumberland, RI Design Review Commission – Hard Copy
- Providence’s “Downcity” - Hard Copy
(<http://providenceri.com/ordinances/AboutTheOrdinancesWebPagesOnline.html>)
- Woonsocket Design Review Overlay District – Hard Copy
(http://68.15.49.6/woonsocket_ri/lpext.dll?f=templates&fn=site_main-j.htm&2.0 See City Codes, Zoning, Section 12: Provisions Governing Overlay Districts)
- Millbury Improvement Society – Downtown Design Guidelines

Other Massachusetts Communities

- Brookline, MA – Hard Copy
(http://www.town.brookline.ma.us/Planning/ZoningByLaw/zbl_1999_Sec500-514.pdf - Section 5.09 of the Zoning Ordinance)
- Wellesley, MA – Hard Copy
(<http://www.ci.wellesley.ma.us/pln/drb/designregulations.html>)
- Dedham, MA – Hard Copy
(<http://www.massapa.org/aicp/DESIGN/DEDHAM.HTM>)
- Franklin, MA (<http://www.franklin.ma.us/town/planning/drcguide.htm>)

- Amesbury, MA
(http://www.ci.amesbury.ma.us/admin/clerk/Zoning_090601Rev.PDF
Page 76 under Site Plan Review) + Hard Copy

Exemplary Processes and Guidelines from Further Afield

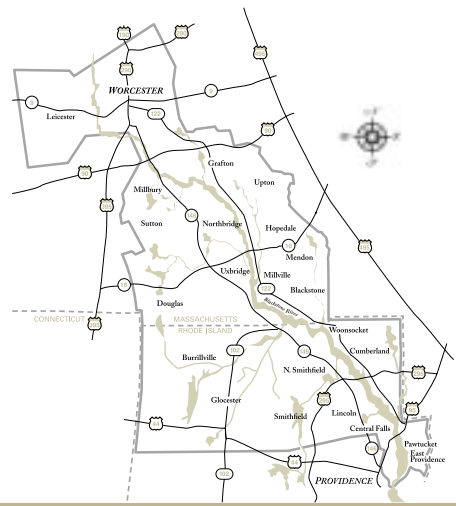
- Burlington, VT
(<http://www.ci.burlington.vt.us/planning/dguide/guides.html>)
- Evanston, IL
(<http://www.cityofevanston.org/Departments/CommunityDev/Planning/designstandards.pdf>)

Model Ordinances & Sample Application

- Design Review Ordinance – adapted from Amherst, MA – from the Growth Management Workbook
- Development Plan Review Ordinance – from the South County Design Manual
- Application – adapted from Wellesley, MA

BLACKSTONE RIVER VALLEY NATIONAL HERITAGE CORRIDOR

The American Industrial Revolution began in the Blackstone River Valley. It changed the landscape of the Valley and transformed life in America. Recognizing its significance, Congress established the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor Commission to assist in protecting and celebrating the Birthplace of the American Industrial Revolution—*join us!*



John H. Chafee

BLACKSTONE RIVER VALLEY

National Heritage Corridor Commission



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